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THE POETRY OF AMERICAN ABORIGINAL SPEECH.

EMERSON has said, "Every word was once a poem," and Andrew Lang, in his facetious "Ballade of Primitive Man," credits our early ancestors with speaking never in prose but "in a strain that would scan." In the statement of the philosopher there is a good nugget of truth, and just a few grains of it in the words of the wit.

There are two aspects of the poetry of speech, poetry of thought and poetry of sound,—the word that epitomizes an epic, and the word that embryonizes a symphony. From the numerous and diverse tongues of the red men of America rich illustrations of these phenomena may be derived, and there is often a close kinship between primitive man and the poet of to-day, the figurative language and personifications of the latter carrying us into the midst of the domain of the former with its naïve concepts of nature and the things of nature.

A modern poet writes :—

"De te voir tous les jours, toi, ton pas gracieux,
Ton front pur, le beau feu de ta fière prunelle,
Je ris, et j'ai dans l'âme une fête éternelle."

Je ris, et j'ai dans l'âme une fête éternelle,—that is happiness indeed. After the poet,—how far we need not say,—comes the Chippeway Indian with his *nin bā'pinéndam*, "I rejoice, I am glad, I am happy," derived from the words *bāpi*, "to laugh," and *inéndam*, "I think." Hence, *nin bā'pinéndam* really signifies "I laugh in my thoughts, my mind laughs."

In their quaint anthropomorphism the old Greeks made Zeus the lightning-wielder and all the gods immortal laugh, while the bards and prophets of Israel make frequent mention of the laughing of Jahve. Whittier, in his little poem, "The Lakeside," sings :—

"So seemed it when yon hill's red crown
Of old the Indian trod,
And through the sunset air looked down
Upon the Smile of God."

And a note in the edition of his works at the writer's elbow explains : "Winnipiseogee ; Smile of the Great Spirit." Such an etymology, however, is impossible, the name containing traces neither of a word for "smile," nor of one for "spirit." But, for all that, the poet has preserved for us the thought of a simpler "maker" of the Red Men. Winnipiseogee does not mean "Smile of the Great Spirit," yet some early New Englander may have stood upon its shore, watching the sun-kissed wavelets rippling to the beach, and heard his Indian com-

panion, as many another, in later days, on the shores of the Great Lakes, has heard his, speak words like these: "Look! the water-spirits are happy; they are smiling to-day!" It was the gentle play of the wavelets in the sun, not the lake itself, that was the "smile of the manitou." There was poetry in the soul of that forgotten Indian, poetry akin to that in the soul of the good Quaker singer, who, in one of his letters, tells us: "Of all sweet sounds, that of water is to me the sweetest. I know of nothing more delicately restful than the liquid voice of brooks, or the low, soft lapse of the small waves of our country ponds on their pebbly margins."

Who does not remember the fair daughter of the arrow-maker of the Dakotas, the bride of Hiawatha, Minnehaha, "Laughing Water," and the cataract by which she dwelt? The *Eau qui rit* of the *voyageurs* of the Great Northwest perpetuates a like train of aboriginal thought.

Those familiar with "Way down on the Suwanee River" will scarcely be surprised to learn that the name of the stream belongs to the harmonious language of the Creek Indians, and is itself musical, — *suwáni* means "echo." It is into this language, or into some other of the Mukhogeian stock to which it belongs, that one might well translate Southey's lines on the "Cataract of Lodore," for it possesses in abundance such terms as these: *okě lăkni*, "yellow water;" *okefenoke*, "shaking water;" *okmulgi*, "bubbling water;" *witúmka*, "rumbling water;" *wiwóka*, "roaring water;" *amakalli*, "tumbling water," etc. Whosoever wishes to learn more of this melodious speech may study it in the interesting volumes of Dr. Gatschet.

Longfellow, describing an autumn morning, writes:—

"Morn on the mountain, like a summer bird,
Lifts up her purple wing."

And the figure of the bird has passed before the eyes of seers in all lands who have sung of the coming of light out of chaos, of day out of night. The old Hebrew cosmogonist who told how in the beginning "the spirit of God moved over the face of the waters," felt as did his interpreter in Puritan England, long centuries afterward, who, casting the figure in a beautiful mould, pictured the Deity as "sitting, dove-like, brooding o'er the vast abyss." And these poets had their predecessors in many a forgotten bard of prehistoric times before whose dimmer eyes the same vision indistinctly flashed. The Copper Indians of Northwestern Canada tell us that, at the beginning darkness reigned supreme until the crow appeared, and, cleaving night with its wings, let the daylight stream through and through. Of the raven, who plays so important a rôle in the creation-myths

of the Indians of the northwest coast, Mr. Deans reports the Haida as saying: "In the shape of a raven he existed from all eternity. Before this world came into being, as a raven, he brooded over the intense darkness which prevailed, until after æons of ages, by the continual flapping of his wings he beat the darkness down to solid ground." (Amer. Antiq. vol. xvii. p. 62.) The aboriginal poet from whom this concept first emanated is worthy to rank with the cosmogonic bards of the Aryan and Semitic culture-peoples.

The Quiché Indians of Guatemala, when they wish to say "the day approaches," "it is beginning to dawn," express it thus, *Ca xaquin vuch*, "now the opossum spreads his legs." (Brinton, Ess. of Amer. p. 112.) The day-god figures also as an old man. From this we may readily pass over to the figure which Shakespeare makes Horatio employ in Hamlet:—

"Look, the morn in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill."

The word *pitā'ban*, by which the Algonkian Indians of the Great Lakes express the idea of "dawn," really sums up Shakespeare's lines. *Pitā'ban* is composed of *wāban*, "day, dawn," and *pit*, "this way, hither," the terms together signifying literally "the day comes this way." *Wāban* is from the root *wāb*, "white, whitish," applied to the color of the sky at daybreak. The "russet," too, has appealed to the Indian mind. In the Delaware language we meet with the expression *machka jappan*, "dawn, aurora,"—the equivalent of our familiar "the sky is ruddy in the east,"—from *machkeu*, "red," and *wapan*, "daylight." A modern children's hymn contains these lines:—

"Early morning! Early morning!
Golden sun, 't is time to rise;
Paint your softest, warmest colors
On the tender morning skies."

And the figure used is one familiar to the students of primitive tongues. The Kootenay Indians call the "aurora, dawn," *kānōs itlmē'yēt*, "red sky," and the "red sky at sunset;" *kītenū's itlmē'yēt*, "the sky is painted red" (from *kītenū'stik*, "to paint red," and *itlmē'yēt*, "sky"). Some of the Chippeways, more anthropomorphistically inclined, attribute the flush of morning to a beautiful maiden, who is painting herself in her lodge in the sky.

In the "Merchant of Venice," Lorenzo bids Jessica

"Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold,"

and one may imagine a pair of lovers among the Navajo Indians gazing upward at the starry heavens while one tells the other the star-story of this primitive people:—

"Now after the sun and moon had taken their places, the people commenced embroidering the stars upon the heavens the wise men had made, in beautiful and varied patterns and images."

But the Indian somewhat spoils the beauty of the conception when he continues:—

"Bears and fishes and all varieties of animals were being skilfully drawn when in rushed a prairie-wolf, roughly exclaiming: 'What folly is this? Why are you making all this fuss to make a bit of embroidery? Just stick the stars about the sky anywhere;' and suiting the action to the word the villainous wolf scattered a large pile all over the heavens. Thus it is that there is such a confusion among the few images which the tasteful Navajoes had so carefully elaborated." (Emerson, "Indian Myths," p. 103.)

Mrs. Barbauld, in her poem on "The Death of the Virtuous," has these lines:—

"So fades a summer cloud away;
So sinks the gale when storms are o'er;
So gently shuts the eye of day;
So dies a wave along the shore."

In the figure of speech she employs,—"so gently *shuts the eye of day*,"—we have preserved through centuries of bardic inheritance the familiar turn of speech of primitive man. The sun is the "eye of day" among widely separated and most distantly related peoples. Many, also, might say with the Mayas of Yucatan concerning an eclipse of the sun, *tupul u uich kin, tupan u uich kin*, "the eye of the day is covered over," or "the eye of the day is shut up." (Brinton, "Primer of Mayan Hieroglyphics," p. 36.)

And, had one the leisure to relate them, instances of equally beautiful and poetic aspects of American aboriginal speech might be cited from the nomenclature of the plant and animal kingdoms. In the song in the "Princess," Tennyson invokes the "Swallow, swallow, flying south:"—

"O tell her, Swallow, thou that knowest each,
That bright and fierce and fickle is the South,
And dark and true and tender is the North."

This migration of the swallow, unremembered in our English name, which Skeat interprets as "tossing about," or "mover to and fro," was not lost sight of by the primitive Chippeways, who called it *cacawanipisi*, explained by Cuq to mean "*the bird that emigrates to the south in the autumn and returns in the spring*." The word for "south" is *cawan*, and the repetition of the first syllable gives the idea of "going and coming." The Kootenay Indians of British Columbia call the Anemone multifida *sūyā'pī ā'qkīs*, "the white man's

cartridge (or arrow)," and Longfellow, in "Hiawatha," alludes to the Indian belief that the plantain (way-bread), "white man's foot," grew wherever trod the foot of the European intruder.

"Wheresoe'er they move, before them
Swarms the stinging fly, the Ahmo,
Swarms the bee, the honey-maker;
Wheresoe'er they tread, beneath them
Springs a flower unknown among us,
Springs the white man's foot in blossom."

The "lady's slipper" is called by the Dakota Indians *pí-sko-ta han-pe*, "the night-hawk's moccasin;" and there are other like names.

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